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INCURIOUS GEORGE

In assessing George Bush's role in the Reagan administration's foreign policy failures, it's easy to confuse the Iran-*contra* arms affair with the Noriega drug-trafficking affair. Both involved subterranean dealings with unsavory characters, both culminated in fiascos, and in both cases Bush is doctoring the record to escape responsibility. If you squint your eyes a little, the two episodes blur together into a single docudrama: Iranama, a tale of how gunrunners and drug dealers drove a vice president to wholesale deceit. But for all their similarities, the two episodes make quite different statements about Bush's capacity to govern the nation, each negative in its own way.

At the Wake Forest debate with Michael Dukakis, Bush tried to minimize the Reagan administration's once-cozy relationship with Panama's drug-trafficking dictator, Manuel Noriega, a relationship that included paying him for intelligence and other services. "It was the Reagan-Bush administration that brought this man to justice," Bush said. "And as the governor of Massachusetts knows, there was no evidence that governor—that, uh, Mr. Noriega—was involved in drugs—no hard evidence—until we indicted him."

Reagan and Bush brought Noriega to justice? Noriega's indictment last February was engineered by enterprising Florida prosecutors, with no encouragement from the White House or Justice Department. In fact, the administration at first resisted the two indictments and only later decided to roll with the punches—to try and dump Noriega by inducing a Philippines-style popular insurrection. The result was the embarrassing failure that festers to this day.

Bush's claim that the administration had no hard evidence of Noriega's wrongdoings until shortly before the indictments took shape is also untrue. We'll leave aside the administration reports about Noriega's drug involvement circulating even back in 1976, when Bush headed the CIA. (And we won't dwell on the fact that, when CIA Director Bush heard that Noriega had paid U.S. soldiers for highly classified information, he chose not to raise a fuss.) Let's focus instead on the past eight years. In 1983 Noriega met with members of Colombia's Medellín cocaine cartel to discuss its plans for setting up business in Panama. In 1985 he emceed a meeting among competing Latin American drug traffickers, helping them divvy up the turf harmoniously. Thanks to a U.S. informant (backed up in the second case by electronic intercepts), both meetings were noted in the government's classified "National Intelligence Daily." In March of this year, a former National Security Council staff member summarized for Congress the long-standing evidence of drug trafficking by the Panamanian military, which Noriega heads: "Available to me as an officer of the NSC, and available to any authorized official of the U.S. government, is a plethora of human intelligence, electronic intercepts, and satellite and overflight photography that, taken together, constitute not just a smoking gun, but rather a 21-cannon barrage of evidence."

Perhaps what Bush meant to say in the Wake Forest debate was what he has said in the past: that, whatever evidence the administration had, he personally didn't have evidence of Noriega's drug dealings until 1988. This is almost certainly false. In December 1985 Bush met with Edward Everett Briggs, then ambassador to Panama. Briggs, a longtime critic of Noriega, had during the past few weeks been sending cables to the State Department recounting allegations of Noriega's role in drug trafficking. A memorandum prepared for Bush prior to the meeting described its purpose as to "discuss U.S. relations with Panama and narcotics matters." Early this year, after the 1985 memorandum was leaked, Bush claimed that Noriega's *personal* role in drug trafficking was not discussed at the meeting. Briggs, after initially declining comment, backed up this story. Other administration officials contacted by the *New York Times* anonymously contradicted it.

A week before the 1985 meeting, newly appointed national security adviser John Poindexter, by then familiar with the evidence of Noriega's drug involvement, had gone to Panama and warned Noriega about drug corruption among Panamanian officials. On June 12, 1986, the *New York Times* reported this mission and recounted evidence against Noriega. Bush contends that none of this clued him in—that, indeed, for years to come he was unaware of Poindexter's mission and of its purpose, even though reports of both had been on newsstands all over America.

Is any of this possible? That Bush, head of the adminis-

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tration's drug interdiction effort, met to discuss Panamanian drug trafficking with an ambassador deeply concerned about Noriega's role in it and didn't hear about these concerns? That Bush, one of eight members of the National Security Council, didn't get word of the national security adviser's warning to Noriega about drug trafficking? Let's suppose for a second that Bush isn't lying. What are we left with? The image of a Vice President Magoo, even more oblivious of the world around him than President Reagan.

This is the theme that unifies the Iran-*contra* and Noriega affairs. Both leave us with the following possibilities: Bush is either telling large-scale lies about the specifics of the cases or is hugely exaggerating when he claims to have been integrally, and competently, involved in administration policy. Or, of course, both.

In other respects the two episodes are quite different. The Noriega affair isn't necessarily a case of bad policy judgment. Granted, Noriega has a history of torture, decapitation, and other forms of sadism that would tempt a morally sensitive administration to cut him loose. Still, we can conceive of circumstances under which a president might choose not to pick a fight with a drug-running dictator, especially when he's a valuable intelligence source. (And we don't buy Michael Dukakis's claim, made during the debate, that the administration's coziness with Noriega has steered America's youth toward drugs.) In fact, we even understand the temptation of Bush to lie about his knowledge of Noriega's activities, given the present anti-drug hysteria. Then again, Bush helped whip up that hysteria. Indeed, he and Ronald Reagan have been in the forefront of the movement to place the blame for drug problems on evil foreigners rather than on ourselves, where it belongs. That, ultimately, is why he finds himself having to conceal his role in the Noriega mess. And that, incidentally, is what lends such pungent irony to another ingredient in the Bush sleaze factor: the fact that some of his closest advisers have made lots of consulting money by polishing the images of Noriega (see Allan Nairn's "Spencer for Hire," TNR, September 26) and Lynden O. Pindling, prime minister of the Bahamas, after they were tainted by charges of drug involvement.

Perhaps the most pathetic point raised by the Noriega affair is Bush's competence in deception. If you're going to lie, as presidents occasionally must, at least do it well.

IN THE CASE of Iranamok, the questions are more serious. Here the administration's policy was inexcusable, and Bush's knowing support of it is now undeniable, notwithstanding his continued denials.

Bush's contention all along has been that he was only dimly aware of the Iranian arms sale, and had no idea that it amounted to an arms-for-hostages swap; nor did he know of George Shultz's and Caspar Weinberger's opposition to it. He only saw the light, he says, in December 1986, after the deal hit the newspapers. Bush said last year, "I wish, with clairvoyant hindsight, that I had known that we were trading arms for hostages . . . and then I would have weighed in very heavily with the president to that effect." Anyone who has read the recently published book *Men of Zeal*, an account of Iranamok written by a bipartisan team of senators, William Cohen and George Mitchell, will have trouble believing that clairvoyance was required. Eyes and ears should have been sufficient.

In August 1985 Bush attended a meeting at which Bud McFarlane, then national security adviser, discussed Iran's request for 100 TOW missiles in exchange for four hostages, prompting Shultz to warn President Reagan that it would be a mistake to fall into "the arms-for-hostages business." At two meetings in January 1986 Bush was present when the president was briefed on, and approved, the plan to swap arms for hostages. None of this evidence makes Bush's claims of innocence seem quite as silly as does a briefing on the arms sales he received from an Israeli official in July 1986. Bush aide Craig Fuller, the only other person present, took copious notes and then prepared a memorandum that has the Israeli official referring to the release of hostages at least five times, and noting at least once that that was a primary purpose of the sale.

Though professing ignorance of this connection between arms and hostages, Bush claims to have had some queasiness about the deal and "to have expressed certain reservations on certain aspects." To whom did he express them? Shultz recalls, in reference to a meeting in January 1986 at which he and Weinberger argued against trading arms for hostages, "It was clear to me by the time we went out that the president, the vice president, and [the others] all had one opinion and I had a different one and Cap shared it." In early February, shortly after Reagan approved the deal, Poindexter wrote in a memo that, though Shultz and Weinberger still opposed it, "President and VP are solid in taking the position that we have to try."

The decisive evidence that Bush has been lying about Iranamok comes, comically enough, from Bush himself. After maintaining for more than a year that he went along with the arms deal because he didn't know it was aimed at the release of hostages, he said to Dan Rather in their celebrated confrontation, "I went along with it because . . . I heard about Mr. Buckley [a hostage] being tortured to death. . . . So if I erred, I erred on the side of trying to get those hostages out of there."

This sort of sympathy is natural. But painful experience has taught that giving in to terrorists, however tempting, is a bad idea in the long run. In fact, that has long been the professed policy of the Reagan administration. "I wrote the anti-terrorist report for this government," Bush boasted in the debate, "the best anti-terrorist report written." What he didn't say is that he found himself unable to abide by it.

You wouldn't know it to hear Michael Dukakis talk, but Iranamok and the Noriega affair together are only blips on the Reagan administration's foreign policy record, which has more than its share of successes. So even if Bush's silence in these matters was decisive, he didn't doom the nation's geostrategy. But the questions of judgment, competence, and simple honesty raised by Iranama are cause for worry about the nation's future under a Bush administration.